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Europe



RELIGIOUS RECONSTRUCTION IN EUROPE

By ALEXANDER MCLEISH

IN any consideration of the problems arising from the reconstruction of civilized life in Europe after the war we are confronted with many difficult questions. Until it becomes clearer what the general conditions are likely to be, nothing very definite can be said.

Various organizations in this country and in the United States are already working on preliminary plans. So great will be the need of starving and uprooted populations that only the United Governments can deal with the situation, and this has been provided for by the organization of U.N.R.R.A. Committees representing voluntary relief organizations in association with Governments have been set up in New York and London. Plans are being considered by an international group for the rebuilding of educational and cultural institutions. It is natural, therefore, that Committees should be similarly set up to deal with the reconstruction of Christian Institutions in Europe. These latter propose to work from London and New York through a Central Committee for reconstruction now being organized in connection with the World Council of Churches at Geneva. The first two of these organizations have short-term emergency programmes, while the latter two are of a more long term character.

There can be no question that the cultural and spiritual basis of Western civilization is in extreme peril and that reconstruction is vital. It may be assumed also that this process of reconstruction is going on now, and that while the old is perishing the new basis of civilization is taking shape.

For five hundred years until the Reformation, the medieval Church provided a unifying faith for European society. Since then the weakening of the Church's influence has led to other claims to provide such a faith. Science has sought to introduce order into the chaos of modern life and admittedly it has failed. The authoritarian power-state has sought to solve the problem by crushing all opposition and producing the semblance of an ordered society. Men still seek a faith sufficient to provide an adequate basis for modern life. Hence, it is of primary importance when we speak of reconstructing Christian Institutions in Europe to ask what exactly it is that we propose to do. It may be that all the King's horses and all the King's men cannot set up again many of the institutions which previously functioned. Dr. James Parkes and others tell us that for the last 400 years the spiritual foundations have been slipping away from under European civilization, and that in consequence that civilization has been breaking up. However adequate the Church was in providing the unifying faith for a medieval Christian civilization it has in these days proved increasingly divisive and speaks with no decisive voice in regard to the problems confronting European life. Others again attribute to the Reformation the progress of the last 400 years and the liberation of the individual from the thralldom of medievalism, in contrast with those who consider the Reformation as the cause of the breakdown of Christian civilization in Europe. It is more probable, however, that the revival accompanying the Reformation saved European civilization from plunging straight into the abyss and gave a breathing space to that civilization to recover itself. We have a parallel to this in the state of society in England prior to the Wesley revival in the eighteenth century and the extraordinary quickening of the social conscience which followed it. Nevertheless, such movements when they have served their purpose lose their impetus. If we assume that Christianity provides the only basis for the complete society, one which will comprehend all men in a worldwide brotherhood, then it follows that there is a fundamental necessity of rediscovering the Christian faith generation by generation and applying it to the problems of human society. Any reconstruction of Christian Institutions in Europe must have this in view. Did the Church (or Churches) as it existed prior to the war look like providing such a basis for a world society? How in fact was that Church constituted?

II

Since 1054 the Christian Church has been a divided body in Europe. The Eastern Orthodox Church then occupied one-fifth and the (Roman) Catholic Church four-fifths of the Continent. Even in the great days of the latter there existed islands of resistance formed by the Waldenses, Albigenses and the Hussite Brethren. One hundred years before the Reformation the latter movement under John Hus held sway over nine-tenths of the population of Bohemia and Moravia. Hence the Reformation of 1517 was not an altogether new phenomenon and mainly underlined the fact that the old Church as an institution had proved unable to adjust itself to a changing world of ever widening horizons.

The Reformation movement, however, was unable to check the forces making for division, and from the beginning split up into the Lutheran Church in Germany and Scandinavia, and into the Calvinistic or Reformed Church in France, Switzerland and Holland. This laid the foundation for further divisions, so that the situation became steadily more complicated. To realize the gravity of the problem the following table of religious populations will repay some little study. These it should be noted are mainly census population estimates and not the actual membership of these Churches.

		Per Cent		Per Cent
Roman Catholic ..	162,250,000	36.0	Lutheran	57,000,000 12.7
Uniat	6,500,000	1.4	Reformed	13,200,000 3.0
Orthodox	88,500,000	19.6	Baptist	658,340 0.15
Jews	9,400,000	2.1	Methodist	118,800 0.3
Moslems	8,800,000	2.0	Other Protestants or Sectarians ..	4,746,000 1.0
Unplaced	99,000,000	22.0		

It is important to note that except in Northern Germany and Scandinavia the background of all religious life in Western Europe is the Roman Catholic Church. The constituency of this Church is considerably more than twice that of all the Protestant groups which only constitute seventeen per cent of the population of Europe. Therefore any programme of reconstitution which leaves the Roman Catholic Church unaffected will be inadequate.

In considering the Protestant Churches it is seen that the Lutheran Church forms more than *three-quarters* of their strength. Hence, the second greatest problem of Church reconstitution lies here. When we come to consider the *Reformed Churches*, with which are connected nearly all the organizations interested in spiritual reconstruction in Europe, we find that they make up between one-sixth and one-fifth of Continental Protestants or only about three per cent of the total population. There are few who will deny that the forward looking elements in European Christianity are to be found in the Reformed ranks, yet it is quite unlikely that to single them out for reconstruction will solve the problems of the needed spiritual basis of a new civilization. This is the more evident when the situation in the Reformed Churches is studied. The popular writings of Karl Barth and his friends very definitely puts back the clock of sane constructive theological thinking. In view of the exceeding complexity of present day problems the general tendency has been to retire from the arena.

It is difficult to fit into this picture of religious life the seven countries of eastern Europe. Here the Orthodox Church forms the predominant religious community (fifty-five per cent). The Roman Catholic Church, however, has a following representing five per cent and the Protestant Churches one per cent. of the population of these countries. Most of these Protestant groups owe their origin to the efforts of American and British Churches, but have scarcely justified their interest. As a means of introducing new life into the older Churches most observers will agree that they have failed.

For good or ill the Orthodox Church is likely to remain the only vehicle of Christian faith upon which the future of these Balkan lands can be built. The fact of its failure to create any tolerable civilized life is written over all their recent history, and cultural life has been mainly mediated from France which is as much in need of a unifying faith as any other part of Europe.

III

The disturbing fact in considering this whole Church situation is that these great organisations after a long period of strife and persecution have settled down to what during the last 150 years has been a state of religious stalemate. In spite of slight gains at the expense of each other their geographical location has not greatly altered. The Roman Catholic Church has made progress here and there as in Holland and the Balkans, and has lost ground in France, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Austria. But for the vast majority of their membership, attachment to the various Churches has been determined by place of birth rather than by conscious religious conviction. The movement away from the Church which until the first world war might have been described as a tendency, has to-day become a torrent threatening to leave high and dry all organized Church life in Europe. The Churches have failed to hold the bulk of the people within the Christian faith which has become the sincere profession of a minority only. In view, therefore, of any programme of reconstruction it is important to notice some of the reasons given for this failure.

The story of the decline of the prestige and political power of the medieval Church cannot be repeated here. The Reformation was only a single, although important, symptom of a widespread spirit of dissatisfaction with the claims and performance of the Church. It did not greatly improve matters for that Church, and while winning the liberty of individual judgment it helped to destroy the sense of community.

The failure of the Churches of Europe to be the salt of society has been growing in recent years. The divisive spirit which marked their origin showed itself also in theological controversy. They have been charged with lack of realism as to the importance of their vocation in a continually changing society, with a spirit of latitudinarianism and with self-centred isolation. They were marked, too, by hesitation in dealing with problems of class, racial prejudice and anti-Judaism. They have steadily declined in numbers and driven out of their fellowship important groups; and they have shown more interest in preserving their historical character in the form of religious cults than in being a re-creative force in European society. Their thinking, it is asserted, has become an intellectual ghetto and their language largely unintelligible to the man in the street.

Conspicuous among specific charges was the unsatisfactory nature of the Church's relationship with the State which in the case of the Roman Catholic Church was opportunism dictated by the desire to use the political power to forward its own interests as an institution. The case of the Lutheran Church was so unsatisfactory that the external affairs of the Church were subordinated to the State, which inevitably developed into a demand by the State for subordination in all things. Another charge made is the support of vested interests. Land, property, and State support had to be conserved, and such questions as the condition of the peasants and the lot of industrial workers were largely ignored. The charge of intolerance and religious bigotry has also been made against all Churches without distinction. The Roman Catholic Church makes exclusive claims which remain a source of contention, while the sectarian and denominational rivalries of the Protestant Churches have been as bitter as those which divide them from the former. Great sections of the Church have not yet learned the secret of toleration exhibited in the Gospels. Further, there has been shown a regrettable individualistic and parochial spirit which has denied the fundamental presupposition of the Gospel that it is a message for all men everywhere. The failure of the Church here is most far-reaching, for nothing could be more clear than that Christ's outlook was a world outlook and viewed all men as

brothers under the sovereignty of God. This individualistic and provincial mindedness so dominated the activities of the organized Churches that the mission of the Church towards the outside world has had to be taken care of by voluntary societies for over-seas mission work and even for home mission activities. The Churches as institutions have proved in a great measure intractable to new ideas, and many interests which were central to its own life have been left to such voluntary organizations. It will be noticed that these failures of the organized Churches are due to coming short of its own ideals.

In many other respects, however, it has been growing more sensitive to the demands of the Christian conscience and many social injustices and economic evils have been attacked with weapons which the Church has forged. While all it has done itself and has inspired individuals to do stands to its credit, yet what it has neglected to do is largely responsible for the plight in which Europe finds itself to-day. While the Church hesitates, the forces of anti-religion do not, and so the Churches face a challenge largely of their own creating.

This then is the situation inside the Churches which we propose to help with the task of reconstruction. There is one thing, therefore, we cannot do, and that is to strengthen any of the tendencies we have referred to as hindrances to the true mission of Christianity. There are still undiscovered resources in the Christian faith capable of inspiring a world Christian society. One of the great tasks of reconstruction will be to see that nothing impedes the emergence of a faith adequate to the need. In many cases there will be a call not to reconstruct, but to reconstitute institutions, and this will most fittingly be the task of indigenous Church leaders themselves for the outsider cannot profitably meddle in such matters. The real problem is an indigenous one.

It would be strange, however, if national and ecclesiastical frontiers had not been over-stepped by activities giving expression to the world vision of the Christian Gospel. Reference has been made to the voluntary organization of foreign missions in some continental Churches. Other inter-Confessional and inter-denominational movements, mostly of Anglo-Saxon origin, have embarked on a world mission. Among these are the Student Christian Movement, the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations, the Salvation Army, the Friends, the Bible and Christian Literature Societies, the World's Sunday School Association, the Christian Endeavour Movement, the International Missionary Council, the Commissions of the World Council of Churches, and World Alliances of many kinds. Many of these world-wide organizations have their headquarters in Geneva, and their activities have been welcomed by the Continental Churches. These organizations are planning to strengthen their work after the war and to make their special contribution to the life of the Churches.

There will be special need of missions of fellowship from the Churches and from the many international Christian youth organizations. Personal friendships between Christians of all ages with their brethren on the Continent will do much to create a sense of solidarity with the Christian Church throughout the world. After the troubles through which the Churches of Europe will have passed it would be surprising if they do not have much to teach us. Any programme of reconstruction must permit of a two way traffic. It is the spirit of brotherhood which matters, and in any case we of the Anglo-Saxon world have our own failures to humble us. We cannot afford to give the impression that we claim to solve the Church's problems in Europe. All we can do is to help them to put their house in order. It is their job and we can only give a helping hand in the hour of their extreme need. So far as material help is concerned, the best we are likely to be able to do will be all too little. What is a million or half-a-million pounds in face of the catastrophic disorganisation which will face the Christian Churches when the war is over !

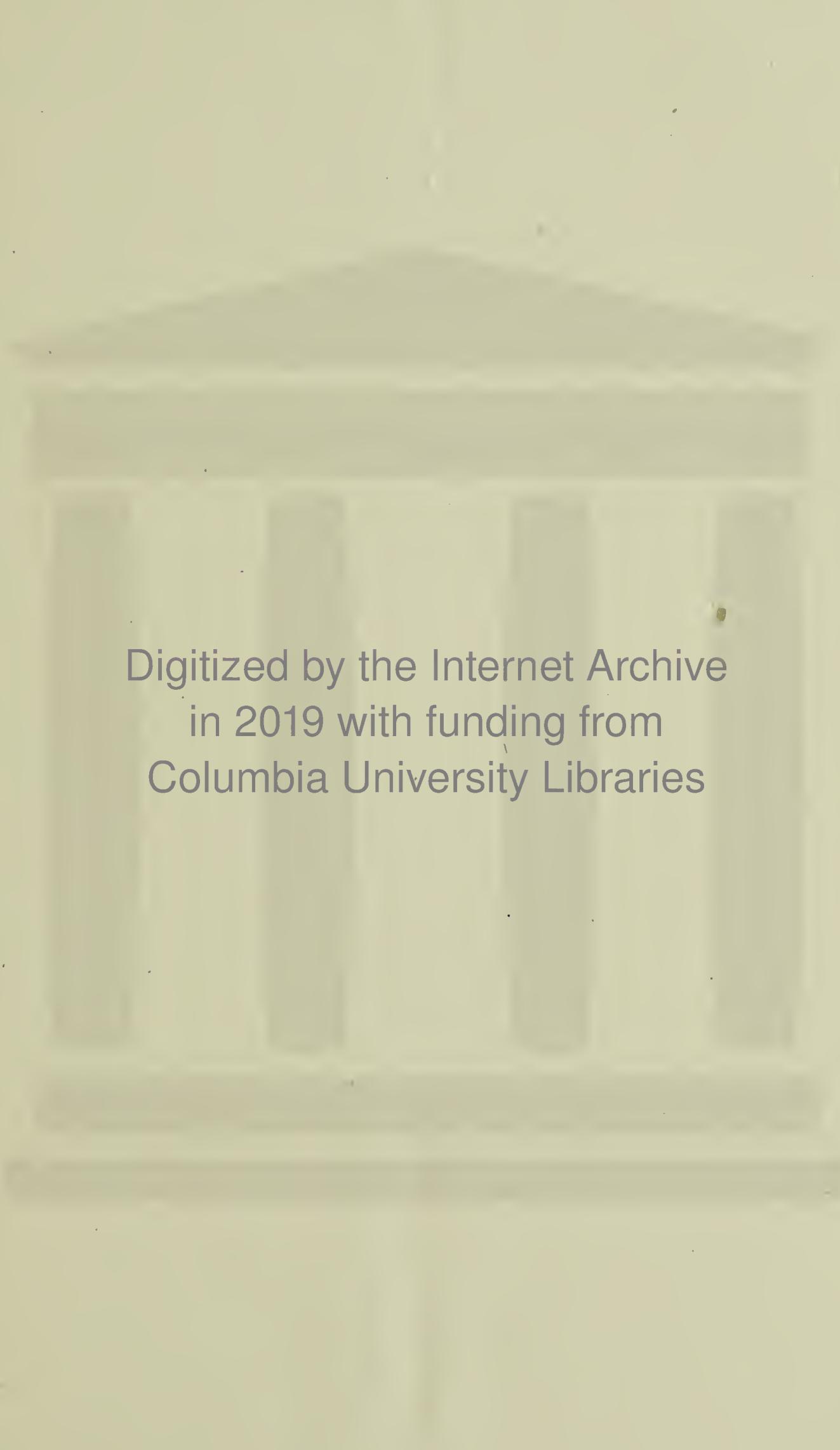
If we believe that the greatest contribution we can make is a spiritual one and that this is the supreme need of the moment, then we shall go a long way towards creating that new world civilization struggling into existence and which aims at breaking down all barriers and treating men of all races, colours and creeds as equal in God. It is admittedly a colossal task which, in my view, only the optimism of the

Christian faith can face. The people of Europe need to recover not only their lost faith in God which lies at the root of the present catastrophe, but also faith in their fellow men. We have only to think of the possibilities of hatred among its uprooted peoples, and this will not be the only result of their disillusionment ! The end is not yet. Every little we can individually do to improve relationships will be an asset. One advantage is that we have a miniature Europe in our islands, and what we can do in association with these exiles will materially help to solve the after-war problem. There is no need to postpone effort till after the war. The way we now face our own problems of reconstruction will be our best contribution to helping Europe to solve hers.

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